



NEWS RELEASE

OFFICE OF THE STATE'S ATTORNEY FOR HOWARD COUNTY

For Immediate Release:

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California Men Plead Guilty; Are Sentenced in Credit Card Counterfeiting Scheme

Two California men have entered guilty pleas and have been sentenced in a credit card counterfeiting scheme that operated in Howard County earlier this year. Raymond Gharibia, 25 of Bell Gardens, Ca., pleaded guilty to a single count of credit card counterfeiting on October 30. Rudolf Mekhakian, 30, of Van Nuys, pleaded guilty to two counts of credit card counterfeiting this morning.

Howard County Circuit Court Judge Timothy J. McCrone sentenced Gharibia to 10 years in prison, suspending all but four years, to be followed by five years of unsupervised probation. Mekhakian was sentenced to two consecutive, 15-year prison terms with all but five years suspended and will be placed on three years of unsupervised probation upon his release.

In February, police began an investigation after a hotel employee reported suspicious activity at the Sleep Inn hotel in the 10000 block of North 2nd Street in Laurel. Three men were paying daily for multiple rooms in cash and leaving the hotel during overnight hours. Evidence of credit card fraud was discovered in one of the rooms.

During the plea hearings, Assistant State's Attorney Tricia Cecil told the court that police set up surveillance and heard a repetitive, "machine-like" sound coming from room 309 (a sound later determined to be a credit card reader/writer machine). Three men left the room during the early morning hours of March 2, two of whom were arrested during a subsequent traffic stop near the hotel. Among the items police seized at the hotel and their vehicle were a backpack containing over \$50,000 in cash and over \$20,000 in postal money orders, credit card reader/writer cables along with a skimming device and various credit cards and debit cards.

A third man who was arrested along with Gharibia and Mekhakian, Kamo Unanyan, 30, of Glendale, Ca. failed to appear at his District Court bail review hearing and his Circuit Court arraignment. A warrant has been issued for his arrest.

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